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ABSTRACT

A case study of an at-risk student in a whole language "transition first grade" (representing an extra year between kindergarten and first grade) classroom chronicles her transition from an anxious and withdrawn student to an enthusiastic learner. Although it took nearly a month for the student to relax in the classroom, she then responded eagerly to writing experiences. Although a quiet person, she developed a real desire to communicate. During writing/journal time, she began to engage the adults and other children in written conversation. During quiet reading she could often be found reading one of the big books using a pointer. She also participated in a class project on plants. The student grew temendously during her transition first grade year because: (1) her experiences were grounded within a genuine social context; (2) she was treated as a learner; (3) she was encouraged to use art, language, and mathematics in concert to construct meaning; and (4) the teacher collaborated with the students when making curricular decisions. (RS)

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INSIGHTS into open education

Accessing Potential: Lessons From an "At Risk" Six-Year-Old

by

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The Beginning

It was the middle of August. The beginning of the school year always brings a mixture of emotions from young children: excitement, anticipation, anxiety, and fear about leaving home. This year was like others in that way. Some kids walked into the transition-first grade classroom bravely on their own; others came in pairs, having met a classmate from kindergarten along the way; still others had to be coaxed in by their parents and then left with tearful eyes in the arms of new adults. Amy was one of the latter. When the class tutor, Sandra Pees, finally convinced Amy's mom to let go, Amy was near hysteria. Amy's frail body shook with fear as Mrs. Pees tried to comfort her.

The transition-first grade room in which Amy and her classmates had been placed represented a year between kindergarten and first grade for most of the children. These children were identified as being "at risk" on the basis of a screening test given to all first graders at the very beginning of the year. While the teacher recognized the inherent problems of homogeneous grouping based on test score data, he realized that this group was truly heterogeneous. The transition-first grade children arrived with tremendously diverse backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. These natural variations in experiences were valued and capitalized on when making curricular plans. Although these children were identified as having special needs, this label did not restrict Tim O'Keefe's teaching. He accepted the children where they were and took them as far as they could go during their time together.

Amy was a very premature child of critically low birthweight. And, while she had recovered physically, her rough start in life left her with emotional wounds to heal and an unusually tight bond with her mother. The separation anxiety between Amy and mother was certainly understandable. It took a good part of the morning for her to calm down. Her glasses framed the fear in her eyes. Every ten minutes or so she would ask how much longer it would be before her mother was going to pick her up. It took at least a month before Amy would leave her mother in the morning without a struggle and tears. And after her mom left there was intense hand wringing and wiping of eyes before she would allow herself to become engaged in classroom experiences. Amy sat in Sandra's lap for part of almost every morning during that first month of school. The special bond between Amy and the class tutor was very important in easing Amy's anxiety of being away from her mother.

While some of Amy's colleagues were also hesitant the first week of school, it didn't take long for them to find their stride as teachers and learners in this whole language classroom. As Ricky commented his first afternoon, "I think I'm really gonna like it in here." Ricky's sentiments portrayed the general feeling in the room. From the beginning, all of the participants began working

together to develop a curriculum that would be enticing and thought provoking. The room had a calm, relaxed tone yet it hummed with activity. Together the teacher and students began devising ways to use reading, writing, mathematics, and art to learn about animals, dinosaurs, transportation, and plants.

Amy's classmates were sensitive about her anxiety and invited her to join them on learning projects. She initially accepted their invitations very cautiously. In an unassuming way, Amy quietly began to offer advice. Sometimes her friends quickly adopted her ideas, other times she spoke so softly that her insights went unnoticed. However, as the year progressed, Amy's status changed from observer to hesitant participant to class expert and curricular decision maker.

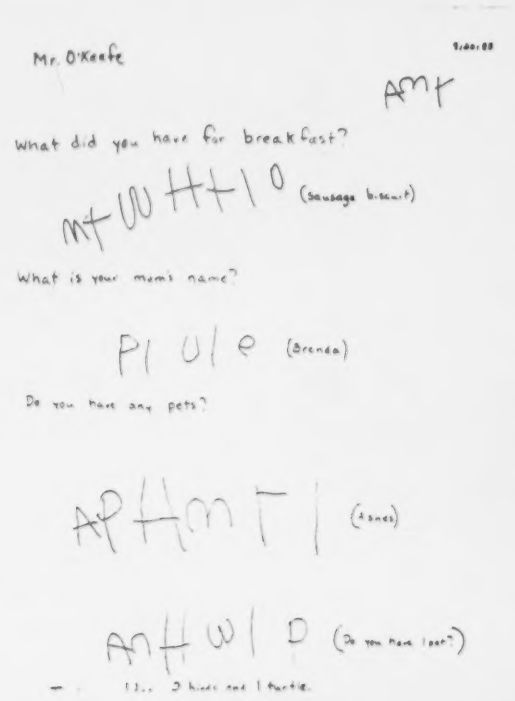
What follows is a re-creation of some of the significant events that seemed to make a difference for Amy as she moved from a hesitant child, relucant to be in school, to a confident, accomplished learner.

The Transition

During the first "written conversation" which is a marvelous ice-breaker, informal assessment device, and a nice "getting to know you" strategy, Amy was initially hesitant but soon was willing to try to write. As Tim, the teacher, and Amy began "talking on paper" (Clyde, 1986), the teacher documented the oral conversation.

> "I don't know how to write anything," Tim recorded in his notes.
> "Just do your best," was his standard reply.
> "O.K.. I'll just try." Amy proceeded to answer the written questions very thoughtfully and asked a question of her own.

Amy's response surprised Tim as he predicted that it would have taken a great deal more encouragement to get her to write. It seemed as if she were beginning to trust her teacher when he



told the children he believed that they could already read and write. She responded to the print meaningfully. Her responses made sense in light of the questions asked. She used what she currently knew about written language to communicate her ideas and in so doing provided important information that would guide her teacher as he worked with her. It was encouraging to see Amy respond to these questions but most delightful when she asked a question of her own. After writing about Ashes, her cat, she asked a very logical question, "Do you have one pet?"

This was only the beginning. As Amy continued to venture out and take risks she began to really shine as a learner and as a teacher in her own right.

During a unit on animals the class pet, Angela the turtle, started laying eggs. This naturally led to a sub-unit on eggs and animal reproduction. Tim read several nature magazines that highlighted egg laying creatures and also read a predictable book, *Seven Eggs*. Next, the children were invited to write their own egg stories on egg-shaped paper.

Amy responded by cutting out five blue eggs and carefully placed them in a nest. Next, she created a large yellow egg that was cracking down the middle. She used a purple crayon to designate the crack. Once her drawing was complete with the parent birds flying above the nest, Amy wrote chicks (chics) above the big yellow egg. Then she proceeded to compose the written text that would further explain the story in the picture. Amy talked her way through the writing. As Amy explained, "There were five eggs in a nest and one other big yellow egg. The big yellow egg hatched and then all of the other eggs hatched. Then there were six eggs. After the babies hatched then the momma cared for the babies."

1 + 5 chicks hatched, makes 6 eggs

Amy's story indicated a developing control of language concepts and a genuine understanding of addition. She naturally embedded mathematics into her egg story and demonstrated how art, writing, and mathematics complement one another when used in concert.

When the project was over and the extra paper was left out in the writing area, Amy took one of the egg shaped papers, cut it in half length wise and colored it to make a slice of watermelon with green rind and red fruit on the inside with a dozen black seeds. Then, on her own, Amy wrote a watermelon poem on the back.

Watermelon Watermelon
grow and grow
Watermelon Watermelon
don't stop growing

When Amy read her watermelon poem, Tim was very impressed and asked if she would share it with the class. She declined, which was predictable. At this point in the year she was willing to take risks with adults privately but was hesitant to go public with her work. When the teacher asked if he could share it, she agreed, pausing and smiling in a shy but proud way. At the next class meeting Tim shared Amy's poem and discussed her choice of words and the rhythm of her text. It became clear that Amy was a poet who was discovering ways to use art and words together with pleasing results. Amy was immediately recognized as the poetry expert. Tim suggested to the class that, if they needed help writing a poem or coming up with ideas, Amy was the one to see.

Following the strategy sharing session, Amy continued to talk about her poem to friends. "Did you hear about my good idea?" she was frequently overheard saying. Tim noticed that Amy and the other children were beginning to

adopt the language of adults in their conversations. It seemed as if strategy sharing sessions like this one provided children with language demonstrations which promoted reflection and observation. The children began to initiate learning experiences and introduce observations with statements such as, "I have a good idea. . . . I noticed that. . . . I found out. . . . " This language indicated that the children were becoming much more planful, intentional learners and saw the value of teaching and learning from each other.

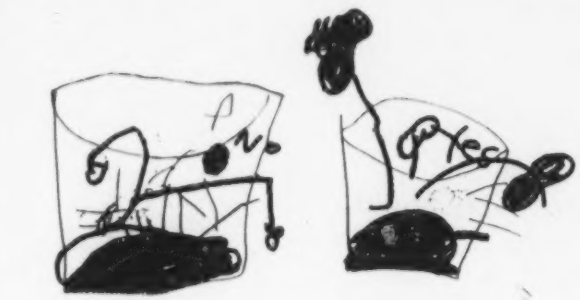
With this brief, self-initiated project, Amy provided many important demonstrations to the class and some important lessons for her teacher as well. She accepted the instructional invitation about eggs and, in a sense, took the "left-overs" to create her own project. She was finally collaborating as a curricular decision maker! Her idea, when made public, became an invitation to others. Her drawing and poem offered an opportunity to have a strategy sharing lesson on poetry, one on which many other children followed up. This helped children to see that they had a vested interest, an ownership, in the curriculum. The importance of sharing children's work publicly also became clear. In addition to giving children a wide audience, sharing children's strategies validated their thinking and demonstrated respect for them as strategic teachers and learners.

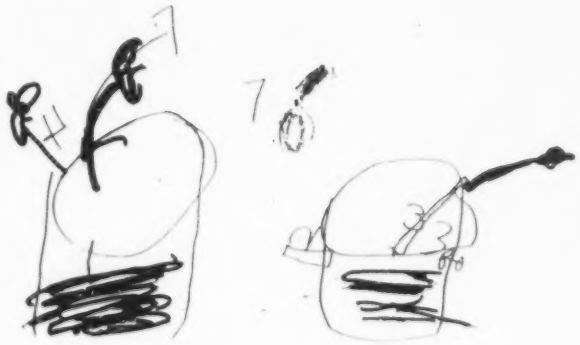
Uninterruped Reading and Writing Time

Amy, like most children in the class, made good use of the uninterrupted writing and reading times we had built into our daily schedule. While Amy was a quiet person by nature, she was developing a real desire to communicate. During writing/journal time, Amy began to engage the adults and other children in written conversations. She also became one of the most conscientious message writers. She was equally busy during quiet reading and could often be found reading one of the big books using a pointer. At times she could even be found leading a small group in reading the large, predictable books.

Extending Class Learning Experiences

During a unit on plants, Amy learned a great deal from formal class experiments. Several experiments were conducted as a class and children were invited to devise plant experiments of their own. The class was supplied with a variety of materials including cups, soil, seeds, paper, rulers, and writing utensils. Amy decided she wanted to find out how lack of sunlight affects plants. To investigate her question, Amy did the following: She filled two cups with soil and planted seeds just below the surface. In one cup Amy planted sunflower seeds, in the other radish seeds. She watered them both and labeled the cups "no light" and "everything." Next, she placed the cup labeled "no light" in a storage closet to protect it from the light. Amy attended to her plant experiment daily, recording her observations in her plant notebook. She used art and writing to convey the results. Her artwork was particularly revealing. Amy used a yellow crayon when drawing the pale, lanky stems of the "no light" radish plants and used a fresh green color to boldly illustrate the healthy plant's progress. Throughout the experiment she used written language to complement and clarify the information in her diagrams. At times, Amy wrote a simple "no" above a solid black circle meaning no light and "yes" above a yellow sun to indicate that these seeds received sunlight. At other times, Amy used measurement to record differences in growth. Finally, Amy shared the results of her project by writing, "Because it was in the dark. My plant has died. My sunflower plant is growing."





Because it was in the dark. My plant has died. My sunflower plant is growing.

Amy took advantage of the invitation to create her own experiment and very thoughtfully constructed a plan that would record the devastating effect of darkness on plant growth. In the process of learning about plants, Amy increased her understanding and use of reading, writing, art, and mathematics as tools for learning.

Developing Concern for Others

There was more to Amy's story than academic growth. Amy was also growing as a human being who cared about others and realized that it was as important to support others as it was to do well herself.

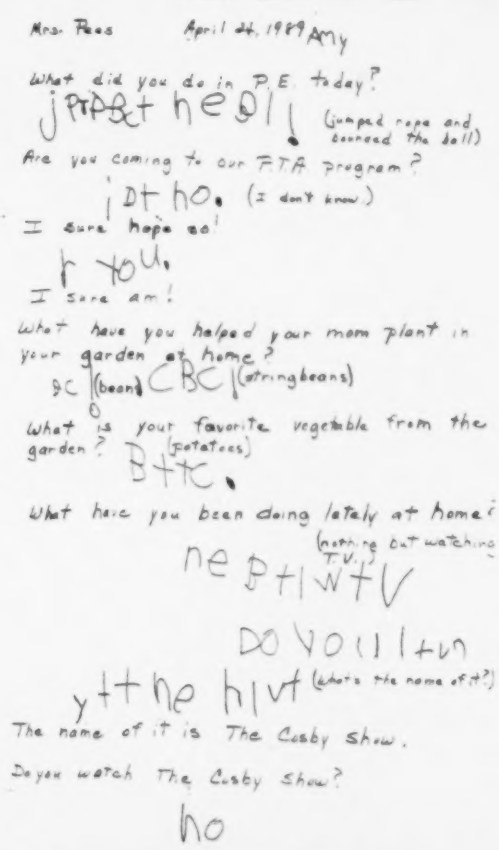
The empathy Amy had toward others was never more clear than when Daniell had a particularly upsetting week in the spring. He was very depressed and the teacher's attempts to bring him around seemed to do no good. He simply did not respond to adult intervention. As usual, the children came through. Amy and some other children gathered around Daniell and thought of ways to make him happy and get him involved. Amy went to the easel and gathered some paper and pastel chalk and brought them to Daniell who was sitting at a table with his head in his hands. She was overheard saying, "If you draw a picture with these colors, it'll cheer you up." Amy also spent much of her quiet writing and free choice time writing messages to Daniell expressing love, sympathy, and concern. Gradually, Daniell did become his normal, cheerful self and this was due, in no small part, to Amy's efforts. Perhaps it was because she had been there herself, but the empathy and understanding that Amy had for Daniell was extremely moving. In a few short months, Amy had been transformed from a child who focused mainly on her own feelings and concerns to one of the most giving children in the class.

Final Story

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that Amy was labeled as academically and socially

immature. It was initially recommended that Amy spend an extra year in kindergarten, and yet she became a very competent reader and writer and not only empathized with other children, but was very thoughtful about the kind of support she provided for them. Because she was supported as a learner and encouraged to take risks, Amy made tremendous growth, socially and academically.

By the end of April, Amy was becoming much more confident and outgoing. She truly saw herself as a writer and demonstrated this in a written conversation she initiated with Mrs. Pees.

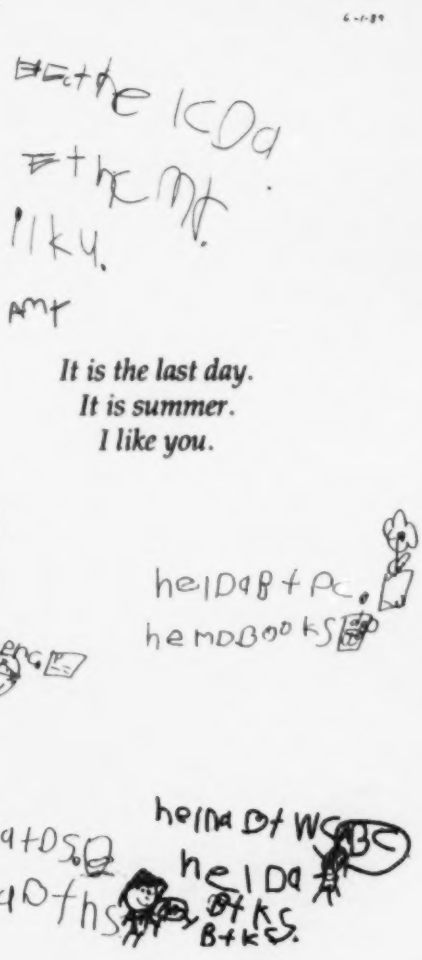

Mrs. Pees April 24, 1989 Amy
What did you do in P.E. today?
(jumped rope and carried the doll)
Are you coming to our F.T.A. program?
(I don't know)
I sure hope so!
I sure am!
What have you helped your mom plant in your garden at home?
(beans) (stringbeans)
What is your favorite vegetable from the garden?
(potatoes)
What have you been doing lately at home?
(nothing but watching T.V.)
(what's the name of it?)
The name of it is The Cosby Show.
Do you watch The Cosby Show?

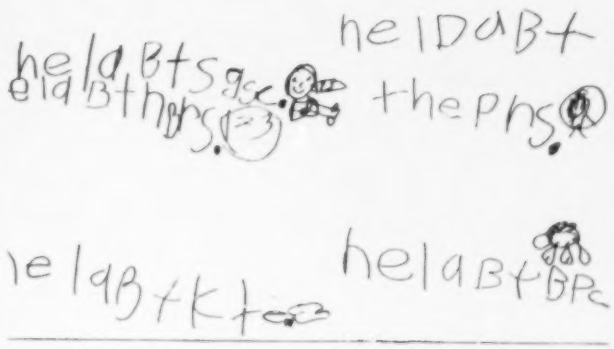
When we compare this written conversation with the first one, we see that her writing did become more conventional over time. More importantly, she became much more sophisticated in the kinds of question and answer strategies she used. She was writing not just for task completion, but because she wanted to communicate, and she used what she knew about language to do so.

Moving On

By the end of the year Amy was very enthusiastic about school and continually made her mother wait at the end of each day while she helped tidy up the room, delivered last minute messages to teachers and friends, and looked in on the class pets one more time before going home. Tim constantly marveled at how much and how fast Amy had grown. Amy's mother had the same sentiments.

When the last day of school came, all of the children promised to write to their teacher. Tim knew Amy would. She must have written half a dozen messages on the last day recording her feelings and reflections on learning in this classroom.





We did math papers.
We tell time.

We learned about plants.
We learned books.

We learned about tadpoles.
We learned about names.

We learned ABC's.
We learned about bugs.

We learned about songs.
We learned about numbers.

We learned about the persons.

We learned about cutting.

We learned about body parts.

It was just as difficult for Amy to leave school on the final day as it was for her to leave home on the first day.

What Made the Difference

Amy grew tremendously during her transition-first grade school year. Of course, we must attribute much of her growth to the fact that she accessed the support that was built into the daily life of her whole language classroom. When reflecting on the key features of the curriculum that seemed to be most important, we believe that there were multiple experiences that were crucial. While we are listing them for review purposes, it is important to note that they were all closely intertwined.

* Amy's experiences were grounded within a genuine social context where she was interacting with her teacher, class tutor, and classmates for legitimate purposes. The children and teachers alike functioned as teachers and learners (Mills & Clyde, 1990).

* Amy was trusted as a learner. Although she had been formally identified as an "at risk" student, this label did not restrict her teacher's vision of her potential. She was afforded the same kinds of experiences that he provided young children regardless of their status (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1989; Smith, 1988).

* Amy was encouraged to use art, language, and mathematics in concert to construct and share meaning. Such opportunities allowed her to realize the nonredundant communication potential of each system. She learned how to use them to effectively convey her insights to others. (Rowe, 1986; Whitin, Mills, & O'Keefe, 1990).

* Amy learned to read, write, and communicate mathematically by using language and mathematics as tools for learning. She learned about language and mathematics by engaging in the process (Halliday, 1975).

* Tim collaborated with Amy and other children when making curricular decisions. He planned with, not simply for, children. Consequently, Amy's voice was heard and valued (O'Keefe, 1990; Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989).

In the end, Tim O'Keefe felt that it was just as difficult to let Amy go on the final day of school as it was for her to leave, for they had each learned a great deal from each other. They touched each other's hearts and minds while living and learning together in the transition-first grade classroom.

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Heidi Mills is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at the University of South Carolina. She is beginning the fourth year of a collaborative research project with Timothy O'Keefe. Together they have worked with David Whitin to explore ways to support the development of mathematical literacy. Their work is cited in several articles and in *Living and Learning Mathematics.* Heidi is also the co-editor with Jean Anne Clyde of *Portraits of Whole Language Classrooms,* Heinemann.

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